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Researching Transnational Solidarities around LGBTQ Politics in Poland: Brief Reflections

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About The Project

We wish to give you a brief overview of our current research project on transnational activist networks and solidarities around LGBTQ politics in Poland. Since April 2008, we have collaborated on research project, funded by the Manchester Institute for Social and Spatial Transformations at Manchester Metropolitan University, in which we are concerned with how transnational sexual 'solidarities' are produced. How do transnational links in political and cultural LGBTQ activism in Poland come about? How are they sustained? And what obstacles stand in the way? We were eager to explore the geo-political context of these activist networks, including a focus on the role and agency of the EU. We have been keen to explore how solidarity it is understood by different actors within the networks we have studied and if the notion of solidarity is, after all, a helpful concept to theorise transnational LGBTQ activism regarding sexual politics in Central and Eastern Europe. How does solidarity relate to notions of self and other? What kind of political subjectivity is articulated through the will to act in solidarity? What else is at stake in these forms of cooperation? Is solidarity counter-productive? Can it be imperialistic or paternalistic?

We have so far conducted interviews with 36 activists in Poland, Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, France and the UK. Participant observation of various events/festivals has been a further element in our methodological approach. The original focus of the project was more narrowly defined with the Krakow 'Culture for Tolerance Festival' and the associated 'March for Tolerance'. Out first aim was to map the transnational LGBT activist networks to these events - to identify key nodes, links and actors with these networks but also to understand how they have been formed and sustained. The scope of the project increased to encompass transnational links more broadly so that for instance we studied the twin city link between Leiden in the Netherlands and Torun as well as activist ties between Warsaw and both Berlin and The Hague. Since April 2008, we attended the following events: The 'Culture for Tolerance Festival' (2008, 2009), the 'March for Tolerance', Krakow (2008), the 'Queer in May' Festival and March, Krakow (2009), and the Warsaw 'March for Equality' and the associated festival (2008). We further observed the Poznan festival and march in 2008; the 'Pink Saturday Festival' in The Hague (2009); the 'Queer Up North'

festival (2007) and 'Get Bent!' festival (2007) in Manchester.

Focus: 'networks'

One of our major interests has been with the emergence and maintenance of networks and modes of cooperation. The experience of tracing networks has been fascinating but after having focused on a (necessarily) small selection of networks in the field of transnational LGBTQ activism, we can see that the task could go on forever.

We were struck by the complexity if the networks which have emerged over years. Networks exist between activists in Poland and activists in a range of different countries (including the UK, Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, France, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Slovakia). Transnational networks consist of connections grounded in different types of organisations - from queer anarchist groups to trade unions and more formal established LGBT organisations. Not all the people we interviewed used the term 'activism' to describe the kinds of activities they were involved in. Transnational links exist between individuals (e.g. based on friendship), very small informal organisations, trade union groups, professional organisations (e.g. working on HIV or education) and larger established LGBT lobbying groups (organised in both national and transnational frames). Some research participants suggested that difficulties in transnational work partially stem from different experiences with or commitments to certain forms of organisational politics. At times, these differences would result in tensions between certain activists, who work as professionals or quasi-professional with long-established organisations and others whose political work is more oriented towards DIY culture and an informal style of interaction. In some occasions, these differences in experience and ways of doing things further reflected intergenerational differences.

Transnational networks often seem to follow the logic of scale. There is a tendency among larger and prominent cities to establish links among each other. There is, for example, strong interaction between capital cities such as Warsaw and Berlin (and the other way round). Smaller cities often have links with smaller cities abroad. The links between Krakow and Koeln, Krakow and Muenster or Leiden and Torun are good examples. An interesting case is the pro-active mobilisation of twin-city links by LGBTQ activists, such as for example Leiden and Torun or Arnhem and Lublin.

While interviewees had different opinions about the impact of the European Union on activist networks there was, there was striking evidence that EU citizenship was central to the development of

activist links. EU citizenship has enabled the creation and maintenance of many networks. The fact that Julie Land, a US citizen and one of the scholars, whom we had invited to attend the workshop, could not attend, due to visa problems, is a striking example.

Accession and EU enlargement went hand in hand with increased opportunities for travelling and (temporary) migration. Some support networks outside of Poland evolved from contacts which Polish people established while studying or working abroad. Apart from migration rights tied to EU citizenship, certain EU funding schemes have been important. The Erasmus student mobility programme was mentioned by many of our interviewees. The EU thus supplied some of the material resources for transnational activism to blossom. We also noticed the significance of migration for the emergence of transnational forms of activism. Sometimes local support structures were set up by Polish people who migrated to these countries. In these local networks, diasporic subjectivities and a diasporic politics provided a strong factor of mobilisation.

Focus:'solidarity'

Our research also created increasing evidence for a continuous shift within the political economy of solidarity politics. These shifts reflect a changing position of Poland within the larger frame of European LGBTQ activism - the growth and intensification of links between Poland and the Ukraine and Belarus provide striking evidence for this observation. Most of the links, which LGBTQ groups in Krakow, Warsaw and Poznan established in the early years of their organisation of marches and festivals were with Western European groups, cities, etc. This is not without exceptions, as the co-operation between Krakow activists and activists from Prague/Brno on the 'Festival for Tolerance' illustrates. Yet over recent months we encountered more and more voices by activists from within the KPH [Campaign Against Homophobia] and the International Lesbian and Gay Cultural Network [ILGCN] which have highlighted the significance of Poland as a supporter for LGBTQ struggles in countries such as Ukraine or Belarus. In these narratives Poland is seen as being pre-destined for this task both because of its geo-political and cultural locations and the 'maturity' of its LGB(T) organisations. This reflects the shifting nature of centres and peripheries within transnational LGBTQ activism - in which problematic evolutionist frames of analysis become over and over again re-cycled.

'Solidarity' obviously means different things to different people. In some accounts, solidarity stands for an act of 'gift giving' or a kind of supportive habitus. The notion (and practice) of solidarity may in

these cases construct an un-even or non-egalitarian relationship. It involves a division of labour and is based on the ideal-typical representation of the ones who are in need of receiving gifts, resources or support and the ones who are in the position to share, give or provide them.

The whole discourse on solidarity thus is 'tilted'. People's different understanding of solidarity is partially based on their social position. It was much more common to hear complaints about or critical reflections of paternalism or neo-colonialism by people active from within local Polish networks. Activists in western- European networks sometimes quite uncritically reproduced such discourses. Sometimes they were also very aware of these connotations and were careful to construe solidarity as an act of mutual support and mutual learning. For some Polish activists, solidarity primarily made sense on the level of the local - and was referred to, for example, the attendance of heterosexuals on risky LGBT demonstrations. At times, it stood for working together to challenge a difficult situation and crisis. At other times, it got evoked for a possible central and eastern European (cross-national) unity in the struggle against cultural authoritarianism and homogeneity.

It should also be noted that not all research participants used a discourse of solidarity or thought it would be appropriate to the context of their politics. Depending on the terms of its articulation, the deployment of the term 'solidarity' in order to make intelligible forms of transnational activism can actually reinforce the relations of hierarchy discussed above. Some research participants further also rejected the notion of activism as an accurate label for that what they were doing. For them, their presence at events and demonstrations was an issue of friendship rather than 'politics' in a classical sense.

Transnational networks regarding LGBTQ politics in Poland are shaped and over-determined by the socio-legal and geo-political realities that govern inter-state relationships within the EU and in Europe more generally. They grow from everyday practices of activists and their social contacts and mobilise around resources provided by both national and transnational institutions and policy frames. Many activists attribute a high value to the maintenance of transnational links and transnational forms of organising. At the same time, this practice is not without difficulties. Differences in terms of nationality (language, culture, age, citizenship, identity) are significant factors which are continuously negotiated in transnational politics.

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